



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF LONG-DISTANCE  
RELATIONSHIP IN UNIMAS**

Lee Chien Hoi

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Judul: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP IN UNIMAS

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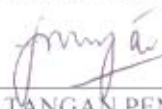
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(TANDATANGAN PENYELIA)

Alamat tetap:

397, Taman Stapok,  
Jalan Ensing Timur,  
93250 Kuching, Sarawak.

PN JAMAYAH SAILI  
(Nama Penyelia)

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**LEE CHIEN HOI**

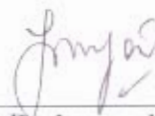
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The project entitled 'An Exploratory Study of Long-Distance Relationship in UNIMAS' was prepared by Lee Chien Hoi and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Counselling with Honours.

Received for examination by:



( Ph Jamayah Sali )

Date:

11/7/07

A -

Grade

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## ABSTRACT

### AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF LONG DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP IN UNIMAS

Lee Chien Hoi

This study aims to explore on the relational maintenance marriage strategies and the meaning, married students attributed to long distance marriage relationships with their partners. In-depth interviews were conducted on three (3) participants to explore their thoughts and feelings about their current long-distance relationships. This study also examined the strengths and weaknesses of long-distance relationships by using interviews data from participants. In addition, commitment is addressed including the strengths and weaknesses of the respondent's relationship. Common themes of trust, commitment to one partner, strong friendship, and using the technique of reminiscing are all dominant issues that emerge from the interview data. Social network approval as well as positive role models in the form of elder siblings are also instrumental in giving support to the success and general positive attitude felt by the participants about the geographic separation. Methods of communication included the telephone which was substituted by e-mail when high phone bills, created financial concerns for the respondents. Variation in physical visitation was affected by the intersection of academic schedule, affordable transportation, attitude towards work disruptions, geographic distance and a general willingness to travel. Result from this study indicated that the respondents could regard in the geographical separation as temporary and necessary. Knowing that they were bettering themselves and their shared future with their partners enabled them to view distance as less daunting. Future directions for studying long-distance married relationships includes collecting partner data and examining gender differences to determine if sex has an impact on how geographic separation is viewed.

## **ABSTRAK**

### *Kajian Terhadap Perhubungan Jarak Jauh Di UNIMAS*

*Lee Chien Hoi*

*Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji cara-cara untuk mengekalkan hubungan dan sumbangan pasangan mereka dalam perkahwinan jarak jauh. Temuramah akan dijalankan terhadap tiga partisipan untuk mengkaji fikiran dan perasaan mereka terhadap hubungan jarak jauh yang dialami oleh mereka pada ketika itu. Kajian ini juga dapat menguji kelemahan dan kelebihan perhubungan jarak jauh daripada temuramah partisipan. Isu-isu seperti kepercayaan, sumbangan, hubungan persahabatan yang erat dan teknik mengimbas balik semuanya terkandung dalam data temuramah. Teladan positif seperti adik beradik yang lebih tua selalunya merupakan pihak yang banyak memberi sokongan kepada pasangan yang menghadapi perhubungan jarak jauh. Alat-alat komunikasi seperti telefon telah digantikan dengan e-mail memandangkan bil telefon yang membebankan. Kekerapan perjumpaan telah dipengaruhi oleh jadual pelajaran, kos pengangkutan, jarak perjumpaan dan kesanggupan untuk pulang rumah. Keputusan daripada kajian menunjukkan partisipan menganggap perpisahan geografi itu adalah sementara dan diperlukan kerana mereka menganggap jarak perpisahan semakin mengukuhkan perhubungan mereka. Kajian yang akan seterusnya adalah seperti kesan seks terhadap pasangan yang mengalami perhubungan jarak jauh.*

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

Over the last 20 years, the study of romantic relationships had become a major area in social psychology. In order to gain a better understanding of these relationships, psychologists had worked to identify and define key factors such as commitment (Johnson, 1997 as cited in Feinberg, 2005) and interdependence (Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001 as cited in Feinberg, 2005). An understanding of relational maintenance strategies, commitment and interdependence are especially applicable to study because on the increased frequency of geographic separation in romantic relationships.

Stafford & Reske (1990) stated that approximately one third of premarital relationships in university settings may be long-distance in nature. Johnston & Packer (1987) stated that long-distance relationships are connected with other social trends

including the increase of educational attainment of both sex as well as the increase of female labour force participation. When men and women need to deal with their career and further study, it creates geographical separation between the couples.

This study is done to explore how husband and wife maintain closeness with their partners when they are separated by geographical distance. This project would conduct a study on the daily maintenance strategies of long-distance couples to provide important insights into marital relational intimacy.

While these issues are certainly important in understanding concerns of the couples who are geographically separated, little in-depth information is available which describes how marital couples experience their relationship and maintain relationship while geographically separated. When an individual is geographically separated from his or her partner, there must be some strategies applied to maintain and commit to each others. Individuals usually encounter different situations where they need to show to their partner. For example, college students may show commitment and be more independent when they are pursuing their tertiary education in which they are geographically separated from their partner. Working adults may show commitments to their partner when they are away on a business trip or study overseas. Commitment, relational maintenance and independence can also occur in long distance relationships caused by business relocation or military duty. The study also emphasizes on describing how couples experience in their relationship and strategies used to maintain relationship in geographical separation.

An understanding of relational maintenance, commitment and independence are especially relevant to study because on the increase frequency of geographic separation in married relationship. A partner in an earlier generation might have many difficulties if they were geographically separated from each other. In order to communicate, couples were limited to expensive phone calls or delayed mails.



Transportation is also very difficult because it is costly and inconvenient. Today, with the help of new and improved technology, it may be easier for couples that are geographically separated to maintain their relationship. With the Internet, keeping in touch with a partner is inexpensive and fast. Moreover, cell phones are also very affordable.

Furthermore, visiting a partner may also become easier now as airline flights are widely used and reasonably-priced. Modern improvements in communication and transportation may help to maintain long distance relationships feasibly.

## **1.1 Statement of the problem**

Many studies have been conducted at the beginning (dating) and the end (divorce) of a relationship, and Duck (1994) noticed that we knew little about how couples stayed close on a daily basis in terms of keeping a relationship to function satisfactorily. There is a lack of information concerning relationship maintenance which certainly applies to long distance partners as well. With the increasing amount of business-related travel done by working adults, the possible negative repercussions of separation on these individuals' relationships are becoming more important to be studied. What we know about relational maintenance tends to be based for geographically close relationships only, thus it is of utmost significance and attention to learn more about daily relational strategies in long distance relationships. Moreover, understanding how partners maintain intimacy despite physical separation provides insights regarding relationship processes.

## **1.2 Objectives of the study**

The purpose of this study is to determine how married couples who do not live in the same geographic location maintain closeness when separated for a period



of time. This study is descriptive in nature, and lent itself to a new understanding of the experience of individuals in these relationships.

The study major emphasis is in the form of in-depth qualitative data with the purpose to gain insight into the emotional experiences that long distance separations generate, along with ways attempted by couples to stay close. A qualitative study enables participants to convey the meanings they attach to their relationship, important information given by the impact that emotions and subjective experience have in intimate relationships (Richardson, 1999). The in-depth data yielded common themes for the participants of this study that began to answer questions about relational maintenance in long-distance married relationships. Through the use of open-ended interview questions, participants had the opportunity to identify strengths and benefits of their long distance relationship.

### **1.3 Significance of the study**

Limited explorations of the long distance marriage have caused a poor understanding about this matter. This study will provide a background to understand more about the key strategies in maintaining a long distance marriage. There are many themes affected by long distance marital relationship for example relational maintenance, commitment, and interdependences.

Aside from that, this study provides information regarding themes other than maintenance marital relationship. This study will serve as a guideline for researchers who want to disclose more information which are related to the long-distance marriage.

Lastly, this study will serve as a basis for future researchers who are interested in gaining more understanding and in-depth study of this topic.

## **1.4 Definition Terms**

### **1.4.1 Relational Maintenance**

#### **Conceptual definition**

Relationship maintenance refers to efforts to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Dindia and Canary (1993) outlined four (4) common definitions of relational maintenance: to keep a relationship in existence, in a specified state or condition, in satisfactory condition and in repair. Traditional definitions assert that maintenance begins after the relationships starts (established to be a 'relationship'), and ends before the relationship disintegrates (Montgomery, 1993). Various researchers have uncovered several dimensions of maintenance. The most comprehensive list includes advices, assurances, conflict management, shared tasks, networks, openness, and positivity (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

In short for this study, relational maintenance is the attempted answer to achieve understanding in the long distance marriage partners.

#### **Operational definition**

In this study context, relational maintenance is defined as the revealing of interviewees' thoughts, feelings, perceptions, or goals in their strategies maintenances relationship.

### **1.4.2 Commitment**

#### **Conceptual definition**

Canary and Stafford (1992) see commitment as "one's desire to remain indefinitely in the relationship" (p. 247). The degree of commitment spouses have toward each other and the relationship is an important factor influencing the course of

a relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). As such, commitment provides the couples' long-term perceptions of the state of their marriages. Canary and Stafford (1992) found that perceptions of marital commitment were positively related to positivity, openness, assurances, network, and tasks.

Rusbult as cited in Feinberg (2005), described commitment as a relationship-specific motive that is characterized by psychological attachment to a partner, long-term orientation towards the relationship and intent to persist in the relationship.

One helpful definition of commitment includes various aspects such as feelings of attachment to their another their partners, desire to continue the relationship even through difficult time and feelings of dependence on that partner and the relationship. (Rusbult & Buunk as cited in Feinberg, 2005).

Rusbult, Drigotas, and Verette (1994) posited that commitment is "a central macromotive in relationships" (p. 123) that encapsulates dependent partners and motivates people to engage in relationship-enhancing behaviours.

### **Operational definition**

In this study, commitment is defined as interviewees' relationship-specific motive that is characterized by psychological attachment to their partner with the geographical separation.

### **1.4.3 Interdependence**

#### **Conceptual definition**

As previously stated, Surra (1985) explains that interdependence can be defined as, “increasing degrees of overlap between partners at different stages of involvement... as the intersection between the partners widen” (p.359).

#### **Operational definition**

In this study, interdependence is defined as the link to the nature of the interviewee’s commitment to their long distance relationship.

### **1.5 Limitations of the study**

Due to economic and geographic control on the part of the researcher, only one partner from each long-distance relationship partner was interviewed. It does not provide the information and aspect about the respective partners of the interviewees. So this study offers limited understanding of another partner. Different issues may have appeared if both partners were interviewed. During each interview, every effort was made to assess if the participant felt that their partner held the same view on the main important issues, such as commitment and fidelity and whether the distance held equal meaning for both partners. Instead, sufficient description was supplied by the respondents which enabled a deeper understanding of the relationship experience from their unique individual perspective.

A second important issue that should be noted was the fact that these participants were all highly educated. Even their partners had at least completed a bachelor’s degree. At the very least, one can assume that educational attainment was



highly valued by these people and contributed to the perspective that academic and professional pursuit were necessary. It would be interesting to sample more educationally diverse populations to explore how educational background might connect with reasons deemed as reasonable for geographical separation.

## **1.6 Research Questions**

This study's emphasis on relational maintenance, commitment, and interdependence, the main questions guiding this study are:

- a) How do long-distance studied participants stay close?
- b) What everyday "maintenance strategies" are used by studied participants to keep their relationships satisfactory?
- c) Why do individuals stay in long-distance relationships?
- d) What shared interdependence do studied participants have with their married partner?

This study examined strengths and difficulties in long-distance relationships by gathering interview data from participants which revealed not only how couples might stay close, but the attached meanings to relational maintenance strategies and shared interdependence. This study explored how meanings about the relationship may connect to commitment towards long-distance partner.

According to Finlay and Ballinger (2006) which Roberts and Taylor define grounded theory as an approach that 'starts from the ground and works up in an inductive fashion, to make sense of what people say about their experiences, and then to convert those statements into theoretical propositions'.

Briefly, in-depth open-ended interviews were utilized in order for participants to have the opportunity to speak in their own words and bring into view the important

aspects of the relationships from their own perspective.

## **1.7 Summary**

In summary, a “multi-layered” analysis was utilized in this study to get the meanings and process where individuals personally experienced when examining their relationship. In-depth open-ended interviews were utilized in order for participants to have the opportunity to speak in their own words and bring forth the important aspects of the relationships from their own perspective. A blending of grounded theory and analytic induction guided data analysis will allow themes to emerge based on the participants’ experiences as well as to organize the findings from the interviews. (Gilgun as cited in Kauffman, 2000).

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

This chapter gives a general idea of empirical and theoretical issues grounding the designed study of long-distance relationships. Firstly, long-distance marriage relationship research will be discussed. Then, a brief summary of research exploratory on relational maintenance with an emphasis on barrier deprivation will be mentioned. Next, the conceptual framework for the study, briefly summarized in the previous chapter is elaborated in detail. Literature utilizing social exchange perspective along with interconnected theories that conceptualize relationship processes such as commitment and interdependence is also discussed in this chapter.

## **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1.1 Staying Close: Relational Maintenance**

Canary and Stafford (1994) define relational maintenance behaviours as “actions and activities used to sustain desired relational definitions”. They explain that maintenance is needed in order to keep a relationship functioning successfully, and that satisfaction will fall apart without constant adjustments to these maintenance behaviours.

Relational Maintenance often focuses on the barriers and attractions that constrain individuals to stay in a relationship. From this perspective, long-distance relationships suffer from “barrier deprivation” (Attridge, 1994) due to the fact that many strategies employed by geographically close couples, such as shared social networks and daily exchanges of affection, are not possible to be done by them. Therefore, other methods of maintaining intimacy and commitment must be substituted or enhanced in order for long-distance couples to stay committed and satisfied. As previously stated, there is a dearth of information about relational maintenance processes in long-distance relationships. What we do know is typically based on research on commuter marriage (Gerstel & Gross, 1984), and may not be applicable to non-married romantic partners.

### **2.1.2 Commitment and Interdependence**

Along with relational maintenance, interdependence and commitment are key elements of close relationships (Kelley & Thibaut, 1983; Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989). Surra (1985) explains that interdependence can be defined as, “increasing degrees of overlap between partners at different stages of involvement...as the intersection between the partners widens”. Elements included in